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ABSTRACT

A survey of 95 Arizona high schools and their problems with school newspaper censorship indicates that whether limitations are imposed before or after publication, the essential conflict is one between viewing the student newspaper as an opportunity for education, or seeing the paper as a public relations agent for the school. Some suggestions for teachers and students in promoting responsible school journalism are (1) clarify the publisher-editor relationship; (2) print a balanced selection of opinion; (3) do "enterprise" reporting on serious campus issues--drugs, the draft, racial problems, the relevancy of educational requirements; and (4) employ good reporting techniques. (MF)

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PROPAGANDA OR EDUCATION? CENSORSHIP AND SCHOOL JOURNALISM

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Censors and Anti-Censors

Both censors and anti-censors perpetuate the discussion of censorship; their divergent educational philosophies force them to. Curiously, both vigorously advocate identical humanistic goals for education--namely, the liberation or fuller development of the humanity of the individual, for his own betterment as well as that of society. The censor believes the individual will develop into a more wholesome human being and contribute to a healthier and more noble society if he is protected from evil, from anything which might defile or corrupt him. Such a position presupposes rather clearly defined if not absolute ideas of good and evil, right and wrong, purity and corruption. The anti-censor, on the other hand, tends to be much less two-valued, much less certain that evil resides specifically in this or that, much more inclined to believe both good and evil to be relative. Above all, the anti-censor believes the individual must have the right to choose for himself, that choices made for him reduce his humanity rather than enhance it, and that there can be no virtue or nobility for man or society without the freedom to make right choices from within the individual.

A survey, made in the fall, 1969, reveals that the publication of school newspapers in Arizona is caught in the cross-currents of these two divergent streams of thought. What seems to be most at stake is this fundamental question: Should the taxpayers' money be used to support a school newspaper which is essentially a propaganda sheet presenting a rosy, cozy view of the school, the community, and the world at large and thus protecting its readers (whether students, faculty, parents, or community taxpayers) from controversial matters which might divide or from unpleasant realities which might defile or corrupt, or should the taxpayers' money spent on school newspapers be expected to contribute to the intellectual growth and development of both newspaper staff and the readers of school newspapers by allowing the staff responsible freedom in the handling of all news (pleasant or unpleasant) in the best tradition of a well-defined publisher-editor relationship found in all good professional journalism? That is, should school newspapers exist for propaganda or education?

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The Survey in Summary

The survey elicited responses from 95 Arizona high schools. The colleges and universities are excluded here because the responses were not considered sufficiently complete. Of the 95 high schools reporting, six (6.3%) do not publish a school newspaper. Ten (10.5%) report absolutely no problems of any sort with censorship. One (1%) reports no problems except faculty criticism. Twenty-four (25.3%) report no problems with censorship efforts but indicate the strong potential of censorship activities if certain topics were treated in the school newspapers. Twenty-six (27.4%) report no direct encounter with censorship activities after publication, but they all submit to some form of censorship prior to publication. Twenty-eight (29.5%) have had direct encounters with post-publication censorship activities within the last three years (1966-1969) with nearly half of that number (12) altering publication policies to adjust to those censorship pressures. Therefore, 56.8% of Arizona high school newspapers have recently undergone pressures from censors, either before or after publication, and another 25.3% indicate the great likelihood of censorship activities should they deal with certain topics.

If one were to take those figures at face value, the problem faced by journalism teachers in Arizona is alarmingly great. Actually, the real situation is not as alarming as those figures would suggest. The survey instrument was by no means wholly trustworthy. The items were so worded that all high schools allowing at least one of the items (profanity and obscenity) should undergo a form of "censorship" since self-imposed restrictions on such matters is a part of responsible freedom of the press. Consequently, the survey is not wholly trustworthy as a measure of the actual potential for censorship of high school newspapers in Arizona communities. On the other hand, equally suspect is the report of ten journalism teachers who stoutly declare that neither have they had problems nor would they have problems were they to allow the use of profanity or obscenity and the like. Their "freedom" is too total to be believed.

Pre-Publication Censorship

What can be believed, however, are those reports of actual censorship activities either before or after publication, a startling 56.8%. Pre-publication censorship typically takes one or more of the following forms: (1) By "understood" prohibitions developed through previous years, (2) By specific prohibitions issued yearly by the administration, (3) By reading of pre-published copy by an administrator, (4) By a cutting off or a threat of cutting off funds. One conscientious respondent checked "'understood' prohibitions" and added the following note: "Our paper has avoided any copy that would invite unfavorable criticism. We regret that we do not treat such questions as anti-draft, labor, poverty...." Another respondent in checking "reading of pre-published copy by an administrator," sounded the most recurring, almost despairing note: "Present policy is that our school paper should present the best possible 'picture' of the school, its students, staff, and patrons". Another, checking both items (1) and (3), added: "We're probably too conservative. Our administration wants more student opinion--gripes, pros and cons on issues such as dress codes, grades, curriculum, schedules, etc.--but I'm sure that racial and religious issues would be unwelcome." Still another who checked item (1) declared, "The students want to write about things that are relevant to them, things that are 'bugging' them--like the dress code, removal of X-rated film advertising, etc.--in editorials. They really have no desire or even the ability or enthusiasm to continue writing 'campus clean-up' or 'school spirit' editorials. My first-year journalism class, in particular, gets very frustrated about censorship in the high school." Naturally, "understood prohibitions" could be interpreted as referring to those proper restrictions self-imposed by a journalism teacher and staff of responsible students. Nevertheless, enough comments of the sort just quoted came in to indicate that a sizeable problem remains.

Post-Publication Censorship

That problem becomes still more explicit as one reads the accounts of post-publication censorship. One courageous journalism teacher (whose paper won a national first place in feature writing recently) reported that funds were cut off in 1968 for speaking out against existing school policies, and he added the following comment: "The principal has asked to see all copy before printing. I refuse to go through this....I joined the teachers' union so that I would have protection in case I had to go to court. I keep an extensive file on all such matters." This person has refused to allow himself or his staff to be badgered into changing a responsible publication policy despite strong administrative pressures. A second respondent, over considerable opposition from administration, faculty, and "concerned citizens," has continued to produce a newspaper that deals responsibly and in-depth on such major issues as race, poverty, student attitudes toward authority,

and the like. Consequently, his paper won first place in national competition in 1969. In his remarks, this respondent quite precisely articulates the basic issue at stake: "I differ with our school principal, who sees the school paper as a primarily public relations organ. I see it as an educational experience and responsible journalistic product, and I have it operating--and understood by my students--on that basis. We publish what we feel is philosophically justified, and just wait for what happens." Another sponsor of an outstanding newspaper from an excellent school in reporting censorship pressures pragmatically, if wryly, observes, "We need to upgrade our paper. As it stands now, it's mostly class news and jokes. I'm working on it, but it's a hard struggle." The struggle of high school journalism teachers is further elaborated on by the following statement from one whose paper recently won first place in Arizona Interscholastic Press Association competition: "If students are going to learn the real meaning of responsibility, they must be given the opportunity to exercise it and must also be 'allowed' to suffer the consequences if they do wrong. I have been firmly told by the [administration] that although the students put out the paper, the advisor is responsible. I don't believe advisors should be blamed for mistakes made by students. Students themselves should learn what it is like to have to answer for their own errors. And isn't this what we teachers are supposed to be teaching them?"

Those Who Struggle

Sometimes the struggle is too great for the individual journalism teacher standing alone. One reports that a group of "concerned citizens" forced a change in publication policy so that now, "We have to be careful not to be critical or to 'hurt' the image with the public on school policies, dress code, and activities of married and divorced students." Another, from one of the outstanding schools in the state, sent a copy of an issue that was confiscated by the administration for a period of time. The advisor of the paper was called into an administrator's office, told he was trying to "blow the roof off the school," and threatened "I will ruin you." An N.S.P.A. first class award winner reports that he wanted his paper to cover dope usage at his school, "but the administration says (quote), 'Our school paper is read by students and faculty in Arizona and other states and by the parents of our community. We want to keep the image of the school clean and above criticism.'" Another advisor, again in one of the largest high schools in the state, writes of administration fear (for example, of MOTOREDE opposition to any mention of sex education) and continues, "We need to be able to admit in print that there is a drug problem not only at other 'schools across the nation,' but at ours....We need to be able to admit in print that many students took part in last week's anti-Vietnam moratorium. We are a house organ or PR sheet....We're trying slowly to prove our ability to talk about something more than the morning announcements...." Finally, one poor tormented teacher exclaims: "We are not able to publish anything that is in any way controversial. We may print nothing that criticizes anything. Our superintendent is even against 'free public press' and has so expressed himself on many occasions. This will probably be my last year, but I have suggested termination of the journalism program [here]."

What Should Be Done

With conditions such as those reflected in the many comments on the returned survey materials, it is rather clear that not a few Arizona schools are perhaps among those throughout the nation criticized by Senator Abraham Ribicoff as offering an educational program that is "old-fashioned, irrelevant and not meaningful ... on the brink of absolute collapse." Small wonder that frustrated young people, among them some of the most intelligent and most talented of our youth, have given

themselves to publishing underground newspapers. According to Murray, there are already some "500 underground high school newspapers, compared to 30,000 regular high school publications".

Is it not time for the Arizona English Teachers Association to lend its support to the Arizona Interscholastic Press Association (especially since many journalism teachers are also English teachers, but just as surely even if they weren't) in pressing for a responsible educational use of the taxpayers' money spent on high school newspapers? Surely, the time has passed for that money to be wasted on trivialities and propaganda.

It must be clearly understood that the removel of censorship from Arizona school journalism does NOT mean the abandonment of responsibility, but rather, for the first time in many instances, the actual assumption of serious responsibility by the newspaper staff with its advisor. It would indeed be ridiculous to dole out taxpayers' money freely to immature and irresponsible students and to allow them free reign in printing simply anything that pleases their whims. There is no educational process in that extreme, and no responsible educator would advocate that.

The censors are to be commended for holding to the ultimate educational ideal of developing wholesome human beings and a healthy, noble society. It is precisely the ideal of those who aver that the methods of censorship can never achieve that ideal. "Goodness" achieved by external controls alone is as unnatural and as much of an impediment as Saul's armor was to David. In Milton's inimitable phrase, there can be no praise for a "cloistered virtue". Indeed, mere conformity to external controls used to maintain a lying facade (to "keep the image of the school clean and above criticism"--regardless of the actual facts) is no virtue at all, but a de-humanizing flight from reality. Should school newspapers exist for propaganda or education? As one heroic but beleaguered journalism teacher writes: "Our student newspaper has just been thoroughly censored by the principal and superintendent. Reporting of facts (two board members present at PTA meeting) is deemed grounds for censorship if those facts, even though objectively reported, might in some way reflect negatively upon the board or administration (in this case the three board members who were absent) . . . . The newspaper should be viewed more as an educational device for staff and readership, less as a propaganda tool for the administration." Taxpayers pay for education, and the school newspaper should just as thoroughly be a part of education as the teaching of English, or math, or science. To allow that money to continue to be squandered on trivia or on merely making the "image of the school" or the administration look good (even if the facts don't support the rosy, cozy view) is a serious violation of a trust.

Conclusions for Responsible School Journalism

The alternative, responsible journalism, must prove worthy of that trust. Responsible journalism, for example, will print and support the rosy, cozy view if the facts warrant it, for responsible journalism is honest. Although most of the following conclusions were reached independently, it is most appropriate to summarize them in the words of one of Arizona's most respected newspapermen, J. Edward Murray, who gave these "specific and practical suggestions for operating high school newspapers" in an April, 1970, address to the Arizona Interscholastic Press Association:

1. Clarify the publisher-editor relationship. The publisher is the school, usually represented by the faculty advisor. It pays the bills. It sets the policy. It has the final word. There will be tension between the

publisher and the editors. But it can be controlled and lived with--and without censorship. And without interfering with traditional free press.

This publisher-editor relationship exists on all adult newspapers. Even where the editor is also the owner and publisher, the relationship exists between him and the editors or staffers under him.

2. Make your high school newspaper a real life newspaper and not just a mouthpiece for the publisher, the school. This means covering official administration news fairly, identifying the principal when he makes school policy or other news. And it means covering student reaction to the official news fairly too. That is being a fair newspaper: giving a factual, balanced presentation. It's a big order, but you have to try.

3. Emphasize the real campus news, the so-called local news which is actually most interesting to the readers. That means controversy, conflict, confrontation in the news. Again, cover this news as factually as possible, giving both sides a fair shake. Remember the high school newspaper should be produced so it will be vital and interesting to students, not so it will seem merely harmless to parents.

4. Print a balanced selection of opinion, from the extremes and from the middle, from the students and from the administration and faculty. Print it and clearly label it.

5. Do enterprise reporting on the serious issues on campus: drugs, the draft, racial problems, the relevancy of the educational requirements. This means activist or advocacy reporting. It's dynamite. But it's here to stay.

6. Set a firm and clear policy on obscenity and vulgarity. And then explain it. The high school newspaper is a mass medium, which rules out obscenity and vulgarity even when they are part of the news. It is not a specialized publication for a specialized audience which is the only kind that can properly print both obscenity and vulgarity. Use of dirty words in mass media tends to condone them, and thereby lowers public taste. But also remember that subjects like contraception, abortion, and homosexuality, if carefully handled, are no longer too delicate for a high school newspaper.

7. Obscenity apart, try to be open to experimentation by the students. Let them try new story forms . . . dialogue . . . humor . . . drawings and cartoons . . . imaginative photos.

8. Teach good reporting techniques. This means actual press conferences by the administration when there is real news, and it means interviews with school officials and faculty members as well as with student leaders. It means perspective and background in stories. It means accuracy and integrity and responsibility.

9. Teach what free press means, what the First Amendment really means.

10. Finally, teach that the price of the mis-use of freedom is fascism. Teach that the revolutionary folly of destroying the old system, without a clear idea of a better one, has very often drawn idealistic youth into its vortex of passion without reason, action for its own sake, force outside the law, and at last terrorism unconcerned for its innocent victims. Teach that the result of all this most often has been a new Establishment worse than the old, usually a military dictatorship called by some other name.